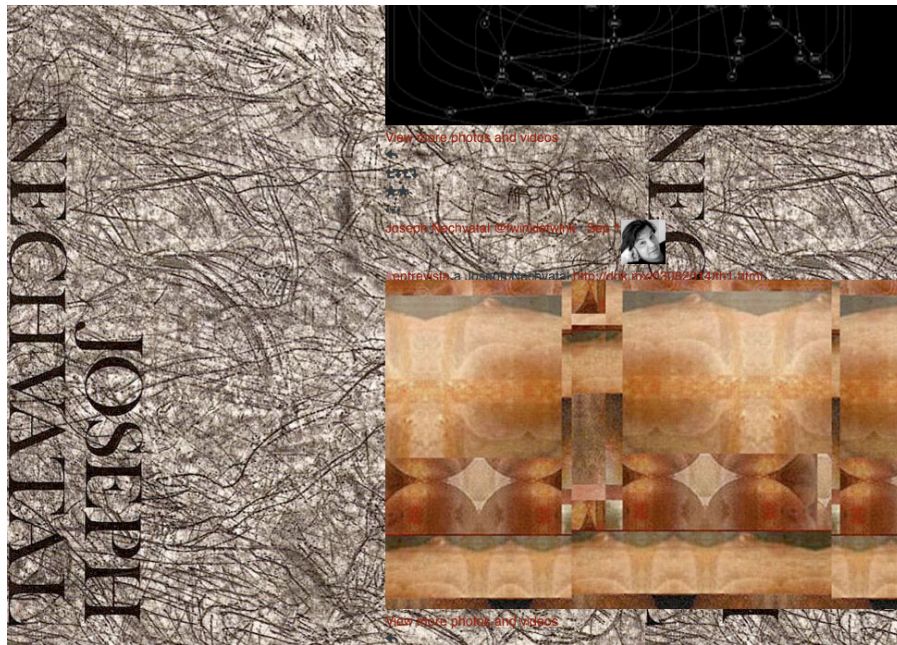Seth Thompson interview of Joseph Nechvatal on April 24, 2006
related to the *Joseph Nechvatal: Contaminations* exhibition at Butler Institute of
American Art Beecher Center for the Electronic Arts in Youngstown, Ohio

Seth Thompson: In a recent lecture of yours that I attended at the Butler Institute of Art, you stated that your custom computer virus programs are analogous to the AIDs virus. How do you see this, and why is this important to you?

Joseph Nechvatal: I think that the life/non-life idea inherent in the viral situation is mesmerizing. Most all viruses have the same general behavior characteristics (a virus invades the host and draws existence from it; wildly reproducing itself, thus killing the host) and I designed my computer virus to follow those characteristics. The AIDS virus was impacting on me emotionally

at the time, so it made sense to move in that direction. I wanted to overcome the fear I was feeling and mark the impossibility of going further in the direction of complete spontaneous sexual freedom. I believe that the inability of society to express itself with spontaneous sexual freedom was the beginning of the political-religious repressive regime that we have now.

Seth Thompson: How do you feel that your work changed from working with Jean-Philippe Massonie to your collaboration with Stéphane Sikora?

Joseph Nechvatal: In 2002 I extended my artistic exploration into the field of viral artificial life through my collaboration with the programmer Stéphane Sikora. I met Stéphane at a conference organized by Prof. Jean-Claude Heudin called *Virtual Worlds 2000*, which was held at Pôle Universitaire Léonard de Vinci in Paris.

I fell into conversation with Stéphane and from that we launched into a collaboration intended on extending my previous exploration with computer software modeled on the viral. Instead of waiting to see what had happened in the computer overnight, as with the Jean-Philippe Massonie software, I could see what was occurring in real time on the screen. That was a major advance.

From there we expanded the project by working with an artistic group of fantastic young French people called music2eye - people dedicated to helping artists operating with digital technology advance their work. We expanded the project into installations form that I called *Viral Counter-Attack*.

Seth Thompson: In your *Computer Virus Project 2.0* installation at your *Contaminations* exhibition at Butler Institute, portraits are the predominant

imagery. Why did you choose a viral attack on these images?

Joseph Nechvatal: The emotion punch of seeing the virus gnawing away at the faces of prominent people in the cyber arena was impossible to resist.

Seth Thompson: Do any works in the *Joseph Nechvatal: Contaminations* show employ a *Viral Counter-Attack*? If so, which ones?

Joseph Nechvatal: No. *Viral Counter-Attack* is an interactive installation by me in collaboration with and Music2Eye. It is not in the *Contaminations* show.

Seth Thompson: What is a *Viral Counter-Attack* and how does it conceptually impact your work that differs from your other work?

Joseph Nechvatal: *Viral Counter-Attack* is a multi-user immersive computer environment which follows certain conventions of the computer war-game precedent. Here multi-users command custom made real-time computer viruses against one another in an image environment created from the my pictorial series called *OvOidism*. In *OvOidism*, terrain-like visual fields are created through the mixing of virally infected testicles, ovaries, breasts, bums, eggs, fruit, and eyes.

The individual virus attacks, which feed off these visual fields, are color coded to identify them with each player's body. By gesturing with their bodies, players can direct the course of real-time virus-verses-virus attacks and engage in complex strategic moves in war-game like fashion. Factors such as strategic groupings, co-operation between players, allocation of eat speed, and the managing of adequate host nourishment are crucial factors at play within *Viral*

Counter-Attack. The audio component is generated by the viral and gestured action in real time.

Seth Thompson: What is your philosophical ideology behind the *Viral Counter-Attack*?

Joseph Nechvatal: To undermine the social appeal of typical computer war-games. To suggest that the ideology of war as a solution for conflict is a deadly mental virus which puts at risk the social body as a whole.